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Human Resources Management: Ethics in Personnel

INTRODUCTION

The Dilemma of the “Shared Fate” Vision versus a Materialistic Society

Ethics relating to human resources management in the library and information services profession must be viewed from a more comprehensive ethical stance at the outset. Since this conference is devoted to a wide range of ethical considerations, it seems appropriate to begin this discussion with some deliberation on career choice itself.

Those who embark on a career in library and information science are, for the most part, “service-oriented.” Of students entering the field in 1988, 65.6 percent indicated that “service orientation” was “important” or “very important” to them. More materialistic concerns such as benefits (35.8 percent), salary (37.2 percent), and status (29.1 percent) were rated far less highly (Heim & Moen, 1989, p. 47). Given these motivations of entry-level librarians, it seems safe to characterize the field as one in which the ethos of “shared fate” has some credence. That is, all individual lives are so important that no individual can be exempted from joining in the task that secures conditions of self-realization for all people.

In his discussion of career selection, Norman S. Care (1987) has provided a provocative challenge to those seeking careers who live in affluent societies. His argument is complicated, but in essence he asserts,

The notion that all human beings are equal members of a moral community and that their lives are bound up together is reflected in the recommendation that deliberations about careers are to be

seriously constrained by the value of service to others. Morality requires, in these circumstances, a service career. (p. 40)

Librarianship is a career for which service has been an overriding motivation for those who chose it. Insofar as arguments such as Care's are developed, those in the field have made an ethical commitment—perhaps the only just and right kind of commitment given the concept of “shared fate”—to a life's work that is sustained by an inherent belief that service is the socially responsible mode.

If this basic precept is considered as ethical personnel issues in libraries are explored, it is clear that simple borrowing from corporate personnel models may not be appropriate. After all, most of the individuals who work in libraries do so with an articulate sense that theirs is a service occupation. In light of this fundamental fact, it may be difficult to superimpose personnel practices that govern for-profit enterprises. Simply put, at the outset of any discussions of personnel practices in libraries, it must be recognized that the library work force is motivated by service.

How does a “service-motivated” work force differ from the work force in general? Why should this be a consideration at all? In the abstract, there are some generalizations that might be made. Salaries, status, and benefits mean less than the opportunity to do meaningful work. Thus these factors have historically been depressed for library and information occupations.

Yet as society changes—unhappily for those who hold a “shared fate” vision for humanity—the supply of librarians has diminished (Moen & Heim, 1988). This might be for many reasons, but an especially disturbing one to contemplate is that “service orientation” is shared by a smaller pool. As the society at large has become more focused on material gain, the low salaries and benefits long associated with librarianship have made it a less attractive career option. The dilemma is that those who currently set salaries may be confounded since they themselves are the product of a time when service-oriented work had a broader appeal. While current entrants still espouse a proclivity to a service-oriented field, the pool of like-minded individuals is shrinking. If library administrators hope to recruit new personnel from a larger pool, they will need to secure salaries and benefits that are more competitive with other professions.

So at the outset of this presentation, the basic ethical dilemma of personnel issues relating to librarianship as viewed by this author is one of conflicting value orientations. Many who currently administer libraries are searching for new entrants with a service orientation at a time when the pool of individuals with this world-view is shrinking. Yet there has

never been a time when disparities in economic status have been greater among and within nations. It is a sad irony that at this time, when it is a moral imperative for those with career choices to choose service, fewer do so.

THE HUMAN RESOURCES MANAGEMENT FUNCTION: BROAD-BASED ORGANIZATIONAL CONCERNS

While the pool of workers with a service orientation is shrinking, provoking a framing ethical dilemma for library administrators, the problem of a diminishing work force in general has affected all employment sectors. In their overview of "Societal Trends and Staffing Policies," W. F. Cascio and R. F. Zammuto (1989) observe that the next three decades pose a major challenge to human resources managers due to an aging work force and a shrinking entry-level employee pool comprised of fewer highly educated and technically skilled workers at a time when organizations must be more innovative and responsive.

To combat these challenges, personnel work has become more sophisticated and a gradual terminological shift to the use of "human resources management" has taken place. The six areas of concern to the human resources management function within organizations are attraction (identifying job requirements and providing equal opportunity), selection, retention (sustaining motivation to perform work effectively and building a healthy work environment), development (preservation and enhancement of employees' competence), assessment (evaluation of job performance and compliance with organizational personnel policies), and adjustment (retirement and outplacement)(pp. 2-2 — 2-3).

Each of these areas of concern provides ethical dilemmas for human resources managers and will be discussed below. However, it is important to first identify areas of concern especially important to those in a library work place.

A recent survey of library administrators ranked "Need for confidentiality" and "Conflict between the rights of the individual and the rights of the institution" at the top of the list of most common ethical problems. These were followed by "Hiring practices and policies," "Fair treatment of employees," "Conflict between the rights of one individual and another," "Affirmative action/equal opportunity," "Discipline and discharge," and "Performance evaluation" (Ethics, 1988, p. 21).

Asked what were viewed as the most important ethical problems facing the profession as a whole, administrators cited "Confidentiality" and "Affirmative action" which tied for the top ranking (p. 22). These

problems will be kept in mind as the organizational concerns relating to human resources management and ethics are discussed below. To give the discussion focus, the ethical issues already identified (Ethics, 1988) are examined.

Attraction/Recruitment

As has been pointed out in the introduction to this paper, "attraction" (or recruitment, as it is more often designated) is undergirded by the larger ethical dilemma facing society: the need for competent individuals to select service careers. The aspects of recruitment that library managers cited as posing the most compelling of all ethical problems are those relating to affirmative action and equal opportunity.

Although affirmative action has been eroded by recent Supreme Court decisions, it is heartening that library respondents view it as a top ethical issue relating to personnel. In her review of issues relating to minority recruitment in librarianship, Ann Knight Randall (1988) observed:

The demographics of the U. S. population are changing. Within the next two decades, one in three U. S. residents will be a racial or ethnic minority. One of the key ways to serve these populations' information needs effectively is to increase the participation of minorities in library and information services. (p. 18)

However, the number of ethnic minorities entering the profession continues to be small as shown by the 1988 LISSADA Survey. Students entering the field in 1988 were 93.7 percent White, 3.7 percent Black, 1.1 percent Asian/Pacific, .8 percent Hispanic, and .6 percent American Indian (Heim & Moen, 1989, p. 89). These statistics have not improved greatly during the 1980s. If data from the LISSADA Survey of 1988 are compared to data from the COSWL Study of 1980, the fact that White representation has held steady, at 93.7 percent, demonstrates no improvement in the ethnic diversification of the profession during the 1980s (p. 149).

Human resources managers must grapple with affirmative action issues. However, adding a tag line to job announcements that the institution is an equal opportunity employer is not enough. It is time to re-examine this commitment and make it real. This is especially important in a milieu in which affirmative action has been criticized as reverse discrimination.

What are the arguments against affirmative action? Thomas Nagel (1983) has noted that it has been viewed as inefficient, unfair and damaging to self-esteem (pp. 483-85). "Inefficiency" objections may mean that there is some initial lowering of performance. "Unfairness"

objections occur if a protected minority is selected over a more qualified member of the majority. However, affirmative action is a means of increasing the economic and social strength of formerly victimized groups. "Self-esteem" objections are difficult to overcome and certainly cause minorities who are fully competitive to fall under suspicion. However, given the small numbers of minorities in the profession, these objections still seem moot.

In thinking through commitment to affirmative action, one point deserves special emphasis: "The goal to be pursued is the reduction of a great social injustice, not proportional representation of the races in all institutions and professions" (p. 149). Those in human resources management need to review these ideas. By definition, the library profession fosters access to information. A diversification of the library work force contributes doubly to the correction of social injustice, both through application of strong affirmative action policies in hiring and through the creation of an environment that demonstrates the strengths of cultural diversity.

Selection

Issues relating to hiring policies and procedures were also ranked high among ethical concerns of library administrators. Confidentiality of references for job applicants and the requirement of the MLS for professional positions were specifically cited as problematic.

Confidentiality

Beth M. Paskoff (1987) has reviewed confidentiality as background for a study examining the use of letters of reference in hiring. She found great variety in attitudes toward confidentiality. Although her respondents claimed that waiving the right to access on the part of applicants was not necessary in letters of recommendation, more than half used telephone references for sensitive follow-ups.

Passage of the Family Education Rights and Privacy Act in 1974 established the right of job applicants to review letters of reference, although the Buckley Amendment established the right of colleges and universities to request that applicants waive their rights to send letters.

Issues of confidentiality do not end at the hiring stage, of course. They continue throughout the personnel process. Annual evaluations, personal problems (such as substance abuse), and terminations all have aspects of confidentiality that must be addressed.

By clearly establishing what aspects of personnel are confidential on behalf of the employee and which are confidential on behalf of the organization, future conflicts can be avoided. If an employee with a

substance abuse problem, for example, uses organizational support to participate in an Employee Assistance Program, it would need to be made quite clear whether this information is so indicated on a personnel file. Without guarantees of confidentiality, most would probably decline such help, undercutting the viability of these programs.

In devising personnel policies relating to confidentiality, it is thus important to weigh and balance employee and organization rights. Increasingly, laws and court cases do make employee records available, necessitating that clear and carefully followed policies be developed for retention of files.

Requirement of the MLS

Partly due to shortages in the field and partly due to the fact that some positions may not appear to require the MLS, survey respondents indicated that the MLS requirement for professional positions sometimes caused ethical problems. Jane Robbins (1987) has reviewed the MLS requirement for professional positions. Her paper, developed for the American Library Association's Office for Library Personnel Resources, is a lucid and convincing argument for the MLS requirement. However, she does cite two concerns that must be confronted. One, the MLS requirement should not be stated as a minimum qualification unless the prospective employer has made a clear analysis of the position and determined that the position requires the knowledge, skills, and attitudes most effectively attainable through formal education. Second, when a position that has been systematically determined to be a professional position is challenged by a local, state or federal inquiry or legal action, the employing unit must steadfastly defend the minimum education requirement set (p. 18). Robbins' analysis is requisite reading for those concerned about the MLS requirement as an ethical issue, as she has made it clear that without thoughtful formulation of job descriptions and announcements, the MLS requirement may be challenged.

Retention

Retaining good employees is important to organizations. While some turnover cannot be helped, much can be attributed to avoidable factors such as wages, benefits, and working conditions. Negative aspects of turnover include disruption to operations, replacement costs, retraining, and lost productivity.

Aspects of retention with ethical implications include compensation and pay equity, conflict between individuals, conflict of personal integrity with the institution, and motivation. Retention is the product of an organization's capacity to sustain employee effectiveness and motivation.

Compensation and Pay Equity

Certainly, adequate compensation is a basic factor in employee retention. Low pay in the library profession has had some effect on the field's ability to attract sufficient numbers of new entrants and has caused others to leave for more lucrative positions.

Compensation management can positively affect organizations. Frederick Duda (1989) has observed that inadequate compensation leads to poor performance, absenteeism, excessive turnover and strikes (p. 106). He also identifies equity—both internal and external—as an important objective of compensation programs.

Pay equity raises many ethical issues. The fact that work in female-dominated occupations is compensated at lower rates than in male-dominated occupations has been abundantly documented. Actions to fight for pay equity in librarianship are delineated in the American Library Association's *Pay Equity Manual* (Kenady, 1989) and *Topics in Personnel Kit #9: Pay Equity: Issues and Strategies* (ALA, 1987). Pay equity is probably the central ethics issue relating to compensation. It is an issue that should concern employers in all sectors. Arguments that oppose pay equity can be stated quite succinctly: fair compensation of women would destroy the current economy. While much rhetoric abounds that attempts to blame the market for lower wages and salaries in female-dominated occupations, the truth is that fair compensation would require major adjustments in the economy. Thus movement toward pay equity has been slow.

However, if human resources managers in library settings elect to choose the ethical course, a top priority in each setting must be a personal and institutional commitment to pay equity issues. So long as public librarians earn less than other municipal workers with comparable education, so long as academic librarians earn less than faculty, so long as special librarians earn less than other corporate administrators, and so long as support staff in any library setting earn less than support staff in other settings, there are important ethical battles relating to compensation to be faced.

The struggle for pay equity must be viewed as a central ethical issue in librarianship. Failure to grapple with this problem would indicate a failure in personnel priorities.

Conflict between individuals

Stress and burnout, which contribute to turnover, are often attributable to poor interpersonal relations in the work place. Charles A. Bunge (1989) has noted that lack of recognition and respect coupled with such factors as "tension between professionals and nonprofessionals, competition for status and resources, irritable and negative coworkers

and gossip" (pp. 95-96) are all stress producing. Many of these tensions can be traced to poor supervision, vagueness of job descriptions, lack of feedback, and conflicting job expectations.

Correction of these problems has ethical overtones in that it requires that administrators and human resources managers recognize the intrinsic quality of workers. Strong vertical organizations without mechanisms for feedback are most susceptible to this type of retention problem. Since correction of environments that foster poor interpersonal relations requires a management style that provides clear policies and seeks employee input, it will first require an administrative commitment to recognition of individual worth.

Motivation

Closely tied to management styles that avoid conflict is the managerial attitude toward motivation. Charles A. Martell's (1989) excellent and concise summary of motivation theory distills this concept in a simple concluding statement: "The best advice is to treat your employees with respect and provide them with meaningful work; include an opportunity for them to discover and use an inner drive to make a contribution and to find recognition for their efforts" (p. 78).

The ethical consideration here is the same that mandates better configured work environments for interpersonal relations: a basic recognition of the fact that each individual in an organization has drives that, when fostered, contribute to organizational effectiveness. This simple ethical decision—to recognize individual worth—destroys a "productivity" mentality, encourages commonly set goals, and creates an environment in which employees will wish to stay and contribute their best.

Conflict of personal integrity with the institution

One additional problem that may impair retention is when an employee experiences a personal ethical conflict with the organization. While initially it might seem difficult to imagine examples in a library setting, there are certainly ethical problems at all levels.

Consider the circulation clerk faced with a large fine to be levied on a patron who has been ill or hospitalized. A rigid bureaucracy might not allow the clerk to make the discretionary decision to waive the fine. Think of the children's department staff of a public library faced with "latch-key" children who must be turned away without parents in attendance in accordance with Board policy. Imagine the librarian in an academic library located at a religious university unable to provide information on abortion rights.

There are countless examples of library situations wherein an

employee's individual ethical stance may be in conflict with the organization's policies. The employee may choose to fight them, may resignedly accept them, or may simply seek employment elsewhere.

In any case, human resources managers must deploy their own ethical senses to provide clear and nonpunitive procedures for resolving ethical conflicts. Librarians in tenured positions may have built-in safeguards when faced with such dilemmas, but those without the protection of academic freedom may be placed in untenable situations.

There is a growing concern for ethical behavior in the business world. A recent study of employers of MBA students in Detroit tested the "Ethics/Integrity" dimension of managers. This dimension was defined as "Demonstrating a system of moral principles or values commensurate with America's Judeo-Christian background and laws, and showing that those principles or values are used in evaluating management decisions and actions" (Mortensen et al., 1989, p. 255).

Results found employers rating ethics and integrity as "moderate to somewhat important." Examples of ethical behavior provided to respondents included "personal ethics" (not compromising one's own standards; providing accurate information to employees, critics, and the public; considering the rights of others in decision-making); "codified ethics" (organization standards of behavior; adhering to laws and regulations; knowing what constitutes acceptable and unacceptable work practices); "ethical analysis" (analyzing the ethical or moral ramifications of problems or issues; evaluating decisions based on their long-term effects on society); and "activist ethics" (refusing to accept dishonest or questionable actions; willing to "blow the whistle" on unethical practices). Among these four types of ethical behavior, codified ethics ranked highest, followed by personal ethics, activist ethics, and ethical analysis.

Given the broader concern about ethics in society, and especially the results of a cross-industry study of businesses as summarized above, it seems safe to predict that instances where individual ethics conflict with the organization are more likely to be discussed, analyzed, and assessed in an open environment. Such action will contribute to fewer retention problems relating to ethical conflicts between the individual and the employing organization. However, it is critical that receptivity to such discussion be conveyed by managers.

Development

What ethical problems surround the staff development function? Certainly several surround selection. Who should be provided development opportunities? Libraries routinely provide scattershot support of professional staff to attend conferences as interest arises. Should the

employee choose or should the organization? Should support staff receive similar opportunities? Should staff be allowed to participate in development opportunities that may provide them with skills and knowledge to move on and apply for other positions in other organizations? Should development opportunities be rewards for those who have been good organizational players?

Embedded in the questions above are some ethical concerns. A human resources manager must develop policies for staff development or individuals will be supported for development for indiscriminate reasons. Without policies that undergird development activities, funds could easily be used without a strong objective basis.

The organization's administration needs to decide if it will take a chance and provide opportunities that move the individual up and out. Clearly, without a well-delineated policy on goals for staff development, there is much room for ad hoc decision-making vis-a-vis the development function.

A commitment to staff development means that extant personnel resources can be used. Without staff development programs—given the rate of change in today's libraries—current staff will not be able to accommodate new technologies and procedures (Lipow, 1989, p. 88). The ethical aspect of development programs is inherent, once again, in a firm belief that staff are individuals with inner motivations and drives that need to be fostered, not interchangeable parts.

Assessment

Performance evaluation or assessment was cited as posing ethical problems in the LPN survey, but the actual conduct of such reviews, if well conceived, should not place evaluators in difficult positions. Lucy R. Cohen (1989) has recently summarized possible difficulties that surround performance evaluations: the "halo" effect (overall positive evaluation based on excellence in one aspect of a job); the "pitchfork" effect (overall negative evaluation based on poor performance in one aspect of a job); "central" tendency (rating everyone average); "loose" (rating everyone high); "tight" (rating everyone low); "recency" (rating on latest performance); "length of service" (rating those with longevity high); and "competitive" (rating as a result of how the rater has been evaluated) (pp. 41-42). However, these problems are not so much ethical as the result of unclear procedural evaluation or lack of policies.

As with so many other personnel issues that at the outset seem to present "ethical" problems, the real problem is one of omission. This omission is of clear and well-publicized policies and procedures as well

as failure to recognize the intrinsic worth of individuals. These are the crux of most ethics issues vis-a-vis personnel.

Adjustment

Outplacement, terminations, and retirement place necessary requirements on human resources managers. In cases of resignations or retirements, a good personnel manual will provide guidelines for a smooth and orderly passing of responsibilities.

Terminations and outplacements, of course, are another matter. "Outplacement" is the term generally used when an organization is "downsizing" and a requisite "reduction in force" must take place.

Termination, on the other hand, does require ethical considerations. In a good discussion of "employment at will"—standard practice in the private sector—Jeanne Isacco (1988) observed that, while there should be mechanisms to discharge employees who are not adequate to their jobs, "it is not in the public good, nor is it humane, just and tolerant for a public employer to abandon these values for the sake of comfort and convenience, even though it may be legal" (pp. 19-20).

Wrongful discharge suits may be avoided by five steps:

- 1) Review employee manuals and handbooks to delete statements that imply a contractual relationship. Avoid, in particular, reference to "permanent employment," employment based on "satisfactory performance," or statements that dismissal will be only for "cause."
- 2) Inform supervisors and interviewers not to make oral promises about the duration of employment.
- 3) Evaluate performance according to objective standards.
- 4) Adopt fair and evenly applied work rules and disciplinary procedures.
- 5) Institute a formal grievance process (Employment, 1988, pp. 20-21).

As in all other aspects of human resources management, great care must be given to apply procedures fairly and objectively. There is good evidence that employees with any grievance history may be negatively perceived even when their cause is just. In a study of public sector organization's grievances between 1979 and 1985, Brian S. Klaas (1989) found that individual work histories did have an impact on subsequent grievance procedures. Certainly, employee recognition of negative treatment when due process is accorded impacts the use mode of these processes. It is simply not ethical to establish these processes and penalize those who avail themselves of those same processes.

A survey of grievance procedures conducted by the ALA Office for Library Personnel Resources in 1988 found respondents positive about the fairness of procedures but negative about adversarial rela-

tionships created by their use. Great care must be used to apply these in a spirit of objectivity (Resolving Employee . . . , 1988).

Professional codes and personnel ethics

The cornerstone of ethical concerns for any is a code of ethics. As this conference demonstrates, ours is an era of renewed interest by the profession and the public-at-large on ethical considerations. In a review of the impact of professional codes of ethics, Mark S. Frankel (1989) has noted:

In recent years, a blend of economic, social, legal and political events has had a profound effect not only on the behavior and performance of professionals, but also on the public's expectation of them. The days of unquestioned admiration on the part of clients or the general public are past. . . . It is quite timely for a reassessment of the professionals' moral role in society and, specifically, of codes of ethics from the perspectives of why, how, and with what impact. (p. 109)

In keeping with a societal concern about ethics, the American Library Association's Committee on Professional Ethics is now developing interpretive statements for each of the points in the ALA Code of Ethics (Ethics, p. 22).

CONCLUSION

This paper has sought to explore *particular* ethical issues identified as important by library administrators within the context of current thinking about human resources management. There are, of course, many more. It seems sensible that ongoing analysis of ethical personnel issues be monitored by the professional associations.

New issues arise every day. In their review of ethical issues raised by information technology, Lawson Crowe and Susan H. Anthes (1988) comment upon the need for personnel with a commitment to information provision. John Olsgaard (1989) has also observed that employee supervision may be impacted by the use of automated systems to track productivity.

Technology will need to be tempered by moral commitment to individual rights and worth. Legal and technical environments may change but at the heart of the matter, untouched by shifting background, must lie a reasoned and humane commitment to a just society.

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